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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR SEMEP GEORGE MITCHELL'S JANUARY  
19-20 VISIT TO LEBANON

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Embassy Beirut warmly welcomes your January 19-20 visit to Lebanon. As the country emerges from a six-month struggle to form a new national unity government, your meetings with President Michel Sleiman, Prime Minister Saad Hariri, Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, Foreign Minister Ali Chami and UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL) Michael Williams will show that Lebanon is an integral partner in efforts to achieve a comprehensive Middle East Peace. Your visit to Beirut will also highlight continued U.S. support for Lebanon's sovereignty and stability while underscoring the state's obligation to exert control over all of its territory. President Sleiman and PM Hariri, in particular, will seek assurances that Middle East peace negotiations will take into account their concerns about Palestinian refugees resident in Lebanon. Meanwhile, Speaker Berri will strongly encourage you to visit south Lebanon and will lobby for Israel to restart negotiations with Syria. UNSCOL Williams will likely express his concerns regarding Israeli backsliding on withdrawal from occupied Ghajar. You will likely also hear criticisms of Lebanon's inclusion on the list of "countries of concern" by the U.S. Transportation Security Administration and objections about HR 2278, the "Anti-American Incitement to Violence" legislation that would apply sanctions to media providers that broadcast Hizballah's "Al Manar" and "Nour" television and radio stations. End Summary.

KEY U.S. OBJECTIVES  
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12. (C) Strengthening Lebanese state institutions continues to be the primary U.S. objective in Lebanon. The U.S. has committed over \$500 million in security assistance to the military and police since 2006 in order to support the GOL in extending control over all Lebanese territory, including in areas dominated by Hizballah. President Obama underscored this objective by emphasizing the importance of controlling arms smuggling into Lebanon during President Sleiman's mid-December visit to Washington. Your visit here offers an opportunity to reaffirm U.S. support for the various Lebanon-related UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCRs), such as 1559 and 1701, that call for extending the state's control over all its territory. Your interlocutors will be keenly interested in U.S. engagements in the Arab world, with an emphasis on the U.S. relationship with Syria and our role in restarting Middle East peace negotiations. They will

likely emphasize Lebanese opposition to settling Palestinian refugees in Lebanon under any such deal.

#### GOL CRITICIZES U.S. ACTIONS

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13. (C) Meanwhile, officials throughout the GOL, including President Sleiman, have publicly and privately objected to the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) decision to place Lebanon on the "countries of concern" list in the wake of an attempted terrorist attack in the U.S. in late December. Presidency Director General Naji Abi Assi argued to the Ambassador that the differentiation between state sponsors of terrorism and other countries of concern was not properly made and the resulting sense of humiliation and embarrassment would only benefit extremists. Concerns about TSA policies continue to be raised with visiting U.S. officials to Lebanon, including recent Congressional delegations. We expect the issue will also be raised with you and with National Security Advisor James Jones during his January 15 visit.

14. (C) Separately, President Sleiman and others continue to object to the U.S. House of Representatives bill, HR 2278, on "Anti-American Incitement to Violence in the Middle East," which would penalize satellite and other media providers that broadcast outlets affiliated with Foreign Terrorist Organizations, including Hizballah's "Al Manar" and "Nour" television and radio stations. Sleiman, in particular, has in recent days referenced the bill, including during his annual address to the diplomatic corps resident in Beirut on January 12. He emphasized GOL commitment to "freedom of the

media and expression" and objected to legislation that would prohibit it. At the reception that followed, Sleiman explained to the Ambassador that he felt "strongly about this issue," but he was quick to reassure her that the GOL appreciated all military and other assistance provided by the U.S.

#### GHAJAR: IMMINENT WITHDRAWAL UNLIKELY

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15. (C) The GOL informally affirmed its support for the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) proposal for Israeli withdrawal from Ghajar and was prepared to welcome the withdrawal in the context of UNSCR 1701. However, as UNIFIL has continued discussing the logistics of such a withdrawal with Israel, the Israeli side has raised additional security concerns which suggest that an imminent withdrawal is unlikely. UNSCOL Michael Williams expressed concern on January 12 that rhetoric was escalating on both sides, thus diminishing the possibility that an agreement would be reached soon. We expect Williams will seek your assistance in pressuring the GOI to step back from its new demands. Williams will also debrief you on his recent visit to Damascus and his consultation with the incoming UNIFIL Force Commander.

#### RECENT SECURITY INCIDENTS

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16. (C) As the new government has begun its work, two security incidents have highlighted the continued threat facing Lebanon because of the inability of its security forces to operate in certain areas. A bomb exploded at the Hamas headquarters in the Hizballah-controlled southern suburbs of Beirut on December 26, and Hizballah initially prevented the security forces from reaching the scene. While the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) took on the investigation once Hizballah authorized its access, the incident highlighted the army's inability to work freely in areas under Hizballah control. Fighting on January 2 between gunmen from Fatah and Jund al-Sham in the Ain al Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp similarly displayed the Lebanese security forces' limited ability to access the camps and the resulting potential for violence to spread and destabilize the country. The LAF is fortifying its existing perimeter security around the Baddawi

refugee camp, near the Nahr al-Barid camp that was nearly destroyed in 2007.

#### "CANCELLATION" OF 1559

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17. (C) Syria's allies in Lebanon have launched a campaign for the "cancellation" of UNSCR 1559, which they see as punitively aimed at Syria and its Lebanese allies. Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri claimed to the Ambassador that with the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon and the election of Michel Sleiman as president, there is no longer any reason for the resolution. Foreign Minister Ali Chami added that the issue of militia weapons is a domestic issue outside the purview of the international community. Meanwhile, PM Hariri has asked the Ambassador for "ongoing U.S. support" for UNSCR 1559, although some observers now believe the issue will not reach the cabinet because of lack of consensus. Hariri advisor Mohamad Chatah explained that Lebanon is calling for a broader interpretation of the resolution, including Israeli violations that would otherwise be covered by UNSCR 1701, to avoid provoking Syria. The issue will likely continue to fester as the preparation of the next 1559 report this spring nears.

#### SEAT ON THE SECURITY COUNCIL

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18. (C) Lebanon was unanimously elected to a rotating two-year U.N. Security Council seat, beginning in January 2010. President Sleiman fought personally for the seat, which he views as an opportunity to bolster his and Lebanon's international prestige and reconfirm its sovereignty. While Lebanon's vote will generally follow Arab League consensus, some issues, especially those related to Iran, Middle East peace, or Lebanon itself, could cause significant political friction in Beirut. While we understand Lebanon's delicate domestic environment, we want to stress that membership on the Council is an opportunity for the Lebanese to demonstrate responsible leadership.

#### HARIRI'S OUTREACH TO OTHER REGIONAL PLAYERS

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19. (C) Prime Minister Saad Hariri, after finally forming a national unity government in December, visited Damascus on December 19-20 to establish a relationship with Syrian President al-Asad as part of a regional detente between Syria and Hariri's primary backer, Saudi Arabia. Prior the visit, Hariri told the Ambassador that he "must go to Damascus to better relations," and he cast the visit as "a new form of achieving sovereignty and independence." Following the visit, the PM's chief of staff (and cousin), Nader Hariri, emphasized that the trip was a necessary adaptation to changing regional and international dynamics. The Syrians, he reported, were "comforting" and the Syrian President sought to establish a "personal relationship" with the PM. Nader Hariri said that the PM "heard all the right things" from al-Asad, whom he described as seeking a new paradigm based on economic cooperation rather than ideological conflict, on the model of Syria's blossoming relationship with Turkey. The prevailing mood in Hariri's camp following the visit is relief, although they remain suspicious that the Syrians will deliver on their promises. Most recently, Hariri visited Turkey January 10-12 to boost bilateral ties as part of his continued outreach to regional capitals.

#### SLEIMAN STRIVES FOR UNITY

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110. (C) President Sleiman has committed himself to representing all Lebanese and to striving for unity among Lebanon's sectarian groups. Although the Christian president's powers are limited by the constitution, Sleiman has emphasized that his absolute priority is maintaining stability in Lebanon by balancing internal and external political forces. Sleiman has also sought to return Lebanon

to its place among the international community, as evidenced by his push for Lebanon's Security Council seat. During his December 14-15 visit to Washington, when you last saw him, Sleiman publicly emphasized the need for continued U.S. security assistance to Lebanon, complained of Israeli violations of Lebanese sovereignty, and called on the U.S. to ensure that any peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians addresses Lebanese concerns on Palestinian refugees. Sleiman's advisors tell us that the message he heard in Washington on the danger that arms smuggling to Hizballah poses to Lebanon continues to resonate with him. We expect that he will emphasize the challenges that Lebanon faces in implementing relevant UNSCRs and ask for U.S. commitments to constrain any possible escalation arising from security incidents along the Israeli border.

#### BERRI AS LEGISLATIVE POWERBROKER

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¶11. (C) Nabih Berri, first elected speaker of parliament under the Syrian occupation, has held the position for 18 years and exerts a strong measure of control over the institution. Berri also heads the Amal Party and partners with Hizballah to represent the Shia community in Lebanon, which is predominantly resident in the south. He will likely emphasize that this will be your first meeting with him and argue that you should visit south Lebanon at the earliest opportunity. Since the formation of the new government, Berri has publicly advanced a series of reforms, including the abolition of sectarianism in the Lebanese political system. Berri is a vocal opponent of international resolutions that target Hizballah's arms, which he believes should be addressed through the National Dialogue process. Berri will likely lobby for U.S. pressure on Israel to restart peace negotiations with Syria.

#### PM'S OFFICE TO TAKE THE LEAD ON PALESTINIAN AFFAIRS

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¶12. (C) Prime Minister Hariri accepted the resignation of

Ambassador Khalil Makkawi, previous head of the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC), effective at the end of January, and Makkawi's close advisors have already been pushed out. Maya Majzoub, who has worked closely with Saad's aunt, Bahia Hariri, on Lebanese-Palestinian issues related to Saida's Ain al Hilweh camp, will assume the LPDC portfolio, which is supported by the UN Development Program.

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